Taiwan and U.S.- China Relations

On January 1, 1979, the United States and the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) established diplomatic relations, almost thirty years after the Communist government came to power in 1949. The process of establishing diplomatic ties with the United States began in February of 1972 when President Nixon visited China. That visit produced "The Shanghai Communiqué," which was an acknowledgement by Beijing (the capital of the PRC) and Washington that the two countries faced obstacles to establishing diplomatic relations, but also that they would work toward "normalizing" their relations.

"It was clear," writes one historian, "that the principal obstacle to regular diplomatic relations, to 'normalization' with China, was not the American role in Vietnam but rather Taiwan." Simply put, the problem centered on the fact that both China and Taiwan claimed that there is only one China, and that Taiwan is a part of China, but each side also claimed to be the legitimate government of China. The PRC objected to the United States having diplomatic relations with both the PRC and Taiwan, because it would mean that the United States believed there were "two Chinas," and not just one China. Further, Beijing demanded that the United States withdraw its troops stationed in Taiwan, but refused to promise that the PRC would not use force to "reunite" Taiwan with the mainland, which the United States asked the PRC to promise.

The PRC government believed that the issue of Taiwan was an "internal" problem; it concerned only the Chinese on Taiwan and the Chinese on the Mainland, and the United States should not interfere. In the **"Shanghai Communiqué"** the United States said that it did not challenge the claim that there was one China, and while restating its wish for a peaceful resolution to the issue, also agreed to reduce U.S. forces on Taiwan.

Despite U.S. opposition, but very much in response to U.S.-China détente, the United Nations in 1971 voted for Beijing to replace Taiwan in the China seat. Finally in 1979, official U.S. ties with Taiwan were cut, in keeping with the U.S. acknowledgement that there could only be one legitimate government in China.

Many Americans were upset at what they felt was the "abandonment" of Taiwan, and soon after diplomatic relations were established with the PRC, the U.S. Congress passed the **"Taiwan Relations Act."** This Act sought to grant Taiwan the same privileges as a sovereign nation, though it was no longer recognized as one, and it promised to make available "such defense articles and defense services as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." Some Americans and members of Congress felt that without a promise by the PRC not to use force against Taiwan, the United States had a moral obligation to help Taiwan protect itself, and also that the credibility of the American strategic position as the guarantor of peace in Asia required this. The PRC government was extremely angry. The issue of Taiwan has continued to be a major obstacle in the PRC's relations with the United States.

In 1982, the United States and the PRC again signed a "joint communiqué" (sometimes referred to as the "the 2nd Shanghai Communiqué") making explicit that the United States would not sell Taiwan a greater number of weapons than it did before 1979, and that they would not be more sophisticated. But, the United States refused to commit itself to a date on which it would stop selling weapons to Taiwan, while stating, however, that the United States was not pursuing a policy to create "two Chinas." And indeed, arms sales to Taiwan have continued at a robust or even increasing level.

Throughout the 1980s the PRC's relationship with the United States continued to flourish, as did the U.S. relationship with Taiwan. The PRC made many offers to Taiwan to "reunify" with the mainland on the basis of "one country, two systems," a proposal that China claimed would give Taiwan plenty of freedom to maintain its own political, social, and economic systems. But most Taiwanese opposed this solution, fearing that it would give them less security and autonomy than their existing status as sovereign state called the Republic of China.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the political system on Taiwan moved dramatically toward becoming a democracy. It held free elections for its legislature every three years starting in 1992 and free presidential elections every four years starting in 1996. As a result of this process both Taiwanese and American policies toward cross-Strait relations changed. Taiwan, for example, asserts its existence as a sovereign state, the need for the two sides of the Taiwan Strait to negotiate as equals, and the superiority of its legitimacy as a democratic government. The United States acknowledged that any solution to the problem of Taiwan’s status must command the assent of the people of Taiwan.

From Beijing’s viewpoint, these policy changes represented erosion of its long-standing claim to sovereignty over Taiwan. Beijing responded by threatening Taiwan with missile exercises in the waters around Taiwan during 1995-1996, an episode which led the United States to dispatch two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region as a show of its determination to prevent a Chinese use of force against Taiwan. In 2000, the election of Taiwan’s first opposition party candidate, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party, again raised tensions in the region, as China suspected him of intending to accelerate the trend toward asserting a separate Taiwanese sovereignty.

While Taiwan changed, the political system on mainland China did not change dramatically. The PRC is reforming its socialist system, but mainly in the economic field. Taiwan and the PRC have established unofficial trade and investment links, and Taiwan permits its citizens to travel to the PRC, and allows citizens from the PRC to visit Taiwan. But so far direct links for mail, telecommunications, shipping, and air travel have not been established and face-to-face talks between delegates of the two sides have been infrequent and not very productive.

The road ahead is uncertain, but perhaps American interests are best expressed in the quote Warren Cohen has taken from Theodore Roosevelt, "it is to the advantage, and not to the disadvantage of other nations when any nation becomes stable and prosperous, able to keep the peace within its own borders, and strong enough not to invite aggression from without. We heartily hope for the progress of China, and so far as by peaceable and legitimate means we are able we will do our part toward furthering that progress."

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_taiwan.htm#ccp>